

Message Text

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43

ACTION NEA-10

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SUBJECT: CUSTOMS SCANDAL TRIAL ENDS

SUMMARY: ON FEBRUARY 13 A TRIAL FOR CUSTOMS EVASIONS BETWEEN 1972 AND 1975 ENDED IN TUNIS WITH CONVICTIONS, LONG JAIL TERMS, AND LARGE FINES FOR ALL BUT 7 OF 67 PERSONS ORIGINALLY INDICATE. THIS TRIAL WAS CULMINATION OF SCANDAL WHICH BROKE IN MID-1975 AND WAS REPORTED TO HAVE INVOLVED THE IMPORTATION OF MISSIONS OF DOLLARS OF CONSUMER GOODS WITHOUT PAYMENT OF CUSTOMS DUTIES. ACCORDING TO GOT PRESS RELEASES, AN INDIVIDUAL NAMED MOHAMED METOUI ORGANIZED MINOR OFFICIALS AT TUNIS AND LA GOULETTE PORTS TO CARRY OUT EVASIONS. HIGHEST RANKING OFFICIAL INDICTED IN TRIAL WAS CHIEF INSPECTOR OF CUSTOMS FOR TUNIS, BUT FEW TUNISIANS BELIEVE THAT HIGHER OFFICIALS WERE NOT AWARE OF EVASIONS AND DID NOT SHARE IN ILLICIT PROFITS. THIS TRIAL IS NOT LIKELY TO END SUCH SPECULATION OR ALLEGATIONS BY ANTI-GOT ELEMENTS THAT CUSTOMS SCANDAL IS TYPICAL OF CORRUPTION THROUGHOUT TUNISIAN SOCIETY. HOWEVER, GOT HANDLING OF CUSTOMS SCANDAL IS INDICATION OF COMMITMENT TO REASONABLY HONEST GOVERNMENT AND PLACES TUNISIA IN A BETTER POSITION THAN MANY OF ITS THIRD WORLD ASSOCIATES IN THE CONTROL OF CORRUPTION. END SUMMARY.

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2. ON FEBRUARY 13, THE GOT COMPLETED ITS TRIAL OF 67 PERSONS INDICTED IN A MAJOR CUSTOMS EVASION SCANDAL THAT BECAME PUBLIC IN MID-1975. SIXTY PERSONS WERE CONVICED AND RECEIVED PRISON SENTENCES OF UP TO 15 YEARS AND LARGE FINES. THE CUSTOMS EVASION RING WAS ORGANIZED BY A MOHAMED METOUI WHO BRIBED MINOR OFFICIALS AT TUNIS AND LA GOULETTE PROTS TO ALLOW FREE ENTRY OF MERCHANDISE. HIGHEST RANKING OFFICIAL IMPLICATED BY GOT IN THE SCANDAL WAS ABDELAZIZ KAOUACH, CHIEF INSPECTOR OF CUSTOMS FOR TUNIS. THE TRIAL WAS ACCOMPANIED BY VOLUMINOUS ARTICLES IN ALL NEWSPAPERS GIVING DETAILS OF SCANDAL AND OF PROSECUTION AND DEFENSE CASES IN COURT.

3. AFTER SCANDAL BROKE GOT LAUNCHED MAJOR INVESTIGATION IN CUSTOMS DIRECTORATE TO UNCOVER EXTENT OF RING. CUSTOMS DIRECTOR SALAH BEN M'BARKA, WHO HAD BEEN IN CHARGE OF CUSTOMS SINCE JULY 1973, WAS REMOVED ON OCTOBER 1 AND REPLACED BY ALI AZOUZ, FORMERLY DIRECTOR OF EXTERNAL COMMERCE AT THE MINISTRY OF ECONOMY. BEN M'BARKA WAS SUBSEQUENTLY APPOINTED INSPECTOR GENERAL OF FINANCIAL SERVICES AT THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE IN DECEMBER AND APPARENTLY WAS NOT HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR SCANDAL.

4. DESPITE GOT'S ASSURANCE THAT THERE WAS NO HIGHER LEVEL INVOLVEMENT, MANY TUNISIANS BELIEVE THAT KAOUACH WAS NOT THE MOST SENIOR OFFICIAL TO PROFIT FROM THE CORRUPTION. SPECULATION ON WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN INVOLVED, HOWEVER, IS DIVERSE AND USUALLY REFLECTS THE PREJUDICES OF THE SPECULATOR. ANTI-GOT ELEMENTS HAVE TAKEN SCANDAL AS INDICATION OF BASIC CORRUPTION OF BOURGUIBA-RUN TUNISIA AND ASSERT THAT ANY NUMBER OF HIGH OFFICIALS WERE INVOLVED IN THIS SCANDAL AS WELL AS MANY OTHER ILLEGAL DEALS.

5. COMMENT: WHILE CUSTOMS SCANDAL CAUSED MAJOR STIR IN 1975 AND OCCASIONED WIDE-RANGING SPECULATION ON WHO WAS INVOLVED AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TUNISIAN SOCIETY IN GENERAL, THE GOT HAS COME OUT OF AFFAIR IN GOOD FORM. MAJOR INVESTIGATION TURNED UP LARGE NUMBER OF INDICTMENTS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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AND INDICATED THAT GOT WAS GENUINELY CONCERNED ABOUT SCANDAL AND DAMAGE CAUSED TO ECONOMY BY CORRUPTION. CONVICTIONS SERVE AS WARNING TO OTHER MINOR OFFICIALS NOT TO GET INVOLVED IN SIMILAR ACTIVITIES. IN GENERAL, SENIOR GOT LEADERS APPARENTLY MAKE THEIR EXTRA INCOME BY USING OFFICIAL POSITION AND CONNECTIONS TO FACILITATE PRIVATE BUSINESS VENTURES RATHER THAN BY RAKING OFF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS. COMPARED TO MUCH OF THIRD WORLD,

TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT HAS REPUTATION OF RELATIVE HONESTY
AND GOT'S HANDLING OF CUSTOMS SCANDAL IS LIKELY TO
ENHANCE THAT REPUTATION RATHER THAN CONTRIBUTE TO
BLACKER IMAGE PROMOTED BY ANTI-GOT ELEMENTS. END COMMENT.
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